

An appreciation of Warren Zevon

Grammys give belated recognition to an enigmatic pop musician

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The 46th Annual Grammy Awards will take place Sunday, February 8, at the Staples Center in Los Angeles. The event—like the Academy Awards for motion pictures—is a ceremony of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences in which artists and technicians are recognized by their peers for their work over the previous year. This year's ceremony will present Grammys in 105 categories and be broadcast by CBS to a potential television audience of 650 million people.

Over the years, the Grammy Awards ceremony has become an event in which musical creativity and artistic expression are increasingly overwhelmed by commercialism and self-promotion. As with the recording industry as a whole, the Grammys have taken advantage of the fantastic achievements in audio technologies—supplemented with MTV-style video imagery—to boost glamour over talent and, in more than one instance, substitute outright charlatantry for musicianship.

Still, the Grammy Awards are given to the year's best based on the judgment of those within the industry itself. The awards process—entry, screening and categorization, nomination and final award selection—is conducted entirely by members of the academy. On this basis, the academy continues to maintain that Grammys are awarded for “artistic or technical achievement, not sales or chart positions.”

Although it is likely to be concealed from the Grammy viewing audience, the recording industry is passing through a severe crisis brought on by the digitization of the recording and musical content distribution process. The free, and often unauthorized, duplication and exchange of electronic files has blindsided industry business leaders and eroded revenues and profits at staggering rates. Meanwhile, the shrinking field of media conglomerates are gambling ever-greater sums in the make-it-or-break-it world of pop music superstardom. In all of this there is little regard for the musicians, the popular culture or the audience.

When viewed in this light, it is easier to understand why the present generation of pop musicians seems to be so removed from the real lives and concerns of their listeners. Failing to understand, and in many cases unwilling to penetrate the façade, the performers participate in the creation of an imaginary reality (supported by all of the merchandising, cross-promotions and so on) to which the largely youthful audience aspires. In this upside-down and inside-out world, art is not a reflection of life, but life emulates an artificial art.

Fortunately, even in this mind-numbing atmosphere there are a few exceptions. Somehow, the best qualities of pop music poke through the cracks in the thick crust of publicity and advertising from time to time. One example of this phenomenon is the posthumous nomination of Warren Zevon for five awards in this year's Grammys.

At first it might appear that this number of nominations is a stretch for an artist who is not widely known and was never recognized by the industry during his 34-year recording career. At the very least, he stands out as an oddity next to the other performers with five or more nominations such as Beyoncé, Eminem, Jay-Z, 50 Cent and Justin Timberlake.

Zevon has been nominated for Grammys in the following categories: (1) Song of the Year; (2) Best Male Pop Vocal Performance for “Keep Me In Your Heart”; (3) Best Rock Performance By A Duo Or Group With Vocal and (4) Best Rock Song for “Disorder in the House” with Bruce Springsteen; and (5) Best Contemporary Folk Album for *The Wind*. In addition, Jackson Browne, Emmylou Harris, Dwight Yoakam, Jorge Calderon and the Eagles' Timothy B. Schmit will offer a live musical tribute to Zevon during the event.

Among the artists who knew and worked with him over the decades, it was understood that Warren Zevon was a significant creative force. For them, the Grammy nominations are a sincere attempt at an appreciation of Zevon for a unique and lifelong contribution to the industry.

There is also no doubt an attempt to cash in on his death. A Grammy nomination is guaranteed to boost sales and it seems to be a law that a pop musician is worth much more money dead than alive—“new” recordings by The Doors continue to be released with significant commercial success some 30 years after the death of Jim Morrison—especially if the artist has a trove of previously unreleased recordings. This process is already under way for Zevon with the recent release of a CD entitled *First Sessions*.

Warren Zevon died on September 7, 2003, from a rare form of inoperable lung cancer called mesothelioma (a disease associated with exposure to asbestos) at the age of 56. After being diagnosed 12 months earlier—at that time doctors only expected him to live for three months—Zevon committed himself to the completion of a studio recording called *The Wind*, which was released three weeks before his death. Zevon was joined on the record by a host of collaborators who pay tribute to his creative genius. Among those appearing are the aforementioned Browne, Harris, Yoakam, Calderon and Schmidt as well as Don Henley, Bruce Springsteen, Tom Petty, Joe Walsh, John Waite, Ry Cooder, Tommy Shaw, David Lindley and Billy Bob Thornton.

A survey of his recorded musical catalog makes it apparent that Zevon's death has deprived pop music of one of its most intelligent and critical contemporary artists. He was one of a generation of folk and rock musicians to emerge in the 1960s who were influenced by Bob Dylan and thought deeply about the authenticity of their expression. Although not particularly prolific Zevon wrote lasting melodies and searing lyrics that dealt with an array of unusual and sometimes controversial subjects. While quite a few of his songs were humorous parodies, he also wrote many meaningful ballads and love songs.

Among his many talents were a tremendous creative range, gifted musicianship and a savage wit. Although Zevon was and continues to be portrayed by the media as the sardonic troubadour and black-humored maverick (which he certainly was), the one thing rarely mentioned is that his recordings were consistently possessed with a remarkable authenticity and realism. In this way, there is something universal about his music.

In the months and weeks leading up to his death, Warren described the writing and recording of *The Wind* as a project for “people I want to say goodbye to.” About the song “Keep Me in Your Heart” he told VH1, “I

don't think anybody knows quite what to do when they get the diagnosis. I picked up the guitar and found myself writing this kind of farewell. Instantly I realized I'd found what to do with myself. On reflection it might be a little bit of a 'woe is me' song, but it made me realize what I was going to do with the rest of the time. It may be the last song on the album, but it was the first song I wrote."

Those familiar with his previous output will immediately recognize Zevon's declining energy level. His voice cracks too often ... he seems not be able to finish ... it is quite sad and difficult listening. For this reason, *The Wind* is not necessarily his best work, but it is nevertheless genuine. His rendition of the Bob Dylan song "Knockin' on Heaven's Door," with its characteristic nasal baritone vibrato, is straight to the point. Among the other more memorable tracks are "El Amor De Mi Vida (You are the Love of My Life)" for its moving melody and "Prison Grove" for its description of the view from death row. The studio sessions for *The Wind* were recorded on camera by VH1 along with some interviews with the ailing artist. These will be available on a DVD later this month.

Most people will remember Zevon from his 1978 hit single "Werewolves of London," which was on his second album, *Excitable Boy* (Asylum). Written in 1975, the song makes fun of the well-dressed English gentlemen-come-gigolo who prey on older ladies in the London night scene. The success of the track, in which Zevon howls his way into the chorus "Ah-woooo, werewolves of London," helped the album make it to number eight on the Billboard Top 200, where it remained for two weeks in May of 1978.

Zevon was born in Chicago in 1947 to a Russian Jewish immigrant father and a Scottish-Welsh Mormon mother. The family moved to Arizona and then California while Warren was a child. Although his father was a boxer-turned-professional gambler, the family insisted that Warren receive classical piano training and, while he was a middle school student, he made the acquaintance of Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft. At the age of 11, he wanted to become a classical composer.

Zevon's entry into the pop music world began in the mid-1960s with Violet Santangelo, a fellow student from Fairfax High School in Los Angeles. With an act called Lyme and Cybelle, the duo went to New York City and made three commercially released singles in the folk-rock style of the times (these six songs along with a few out-takes and some solo Zevon tunes are now available on a CD called *First Sessions*). This experience proved to be important, as Lyme and Cybelle producer Bones Howe recognized Warren's songwriting talents. Howe used one of the Lyme and Cybelle tunes "Outside Chance" with another one of his acts, The Turtles. Zevon also wrote the B-side song ("Like the Seasons") on the well-known Turtles hit "Happy Together."

By this time, Warren was just 19 years old and he was just beginning to find his own creative style. After moving back to the West Coast, he took some work writing advertising jingles for Chevrolet and Boone's Farm wine and as a studio pianist. Zevon initiated a solo recording effort in 1969 with the release of the poorly received *Wanted Dead or Alive*. It might have appeared that this was the last to be heard from the kid from Fairfax High. However, one of the tracks from this album, "She Quit Me," made it onto the soundtrack of the Oscar-winning movie *Midnight Cowboy*.

Clearly a musical talent, Warren became the pianist and bandleader for the Everly Brothers for the next two years. Then, after a brief period of seeking a recording contract in Spain, Warren returned to Southern California where he fit in with a burgeoning pop music crowd that included Jackson Browne. Having written some new songs, Zevon signed a recording deal with Asylum Records and, with Browne as producer, released *Warren Zevon* in 1976. Linda Ronstadt liked his work so much that she made a tune from this album called "Hasten Down the Wind" the title song of her 1976 release. One year later, she would go on to make a

hit single out of another Zevon song called "Poor, Poor Pitiful Me."

By the time *Excitable Boy* was released in 1978, Zevon had a large number of well-known musicians backing his career as a singer-songwriter. This record included the participation of Ronstadt, John McVie and Mic Fleetwood (Fleetwood Mac), Jeff Porcaro, Karla Bonoff, Jorge Calderon and JD Souther. It would be his first and only commercial success. As he recalled some years later, "When *Excitable Boy* was in the top 10, the president of the record company brought me into his office and said, 'Well, so you sold 700,000 copies. There was a time when we would've celebrated that. But, I mean, the Eagles sold 14 million worldwide.' So it was like, 'you failed.'"

Early on, Zevon began to write about dark and offbeat topics. The title track to *Excitable Boy* was about a disturbed boy who rapes and kills his girlfriend. In his pulp-fiction world, he gravitated toward the dispossessed and seedy side of American life. Even his love songs were about heartache ... from being dumped by your lover. Ironically, much of his material dealt with mortality as the title of some of his albums illustrates: *Stand in the Fire* (1980), *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead* (1996) *Life'll Kill Ya* (2000), and *My Ride's Here* (2001)—about the final trip in a hearse to the graveyard.

Zevon had an explanation for this. As he told VH1: "Hemingway said all good stories ended in death, and I write songs about death and violence for some reason. Some of them are based on my upbringing and some are based on my reading habits. We live in a culture where violence is all around us and I found myself writing more songs about violence than romantic subjects. I like to think I have some goodhearted romantic impulses now and then, but for the most part I write a different kind of song."

And indeed he did. The songs themselves really tell the story: "Carmelita" is about a heroine addict contemplating suicide. "Gorilla, You're a Desperado" is a send-up of the yuppie lifestyle in Southern California. "The Envoy" is about US diplomatic intrigue in the Middle East. "Charlie's Medicine" is about a drug addict whose dealer is shot to death by one of his well-heeled clients. "Porcelain Monkey" is a poke at the fate of Elvis Presley. "Seminole Bingo" is about a junk-bond dealer hiding out from federal authorities on an Indian reservation. There are many more.

The effectiveness of Zevon's writing was explained by Jackson Browne in a recent *Rolling Stone* interview: "His songs are like short stories, the best songs always are ... [Warren Zevon was] a guy who could say something in a few words that was immediately understood."

Despite Zevon's lack of popular acclaim, his career was continuously buoyed by support from artists from a variety of backgrounds and musical genres. Only a few notable performers can be listed here: Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Chick Corea, Brian Setzer, George Clinton, David Gilmour (Pink Floyd), Jerry Garcia and Jack Casady (Jefferson Airplane). In 1990, Zevon released an album with three members of the rock group REM under the title of *Hindu Love Gods*, which was actually a studio session recording of their favorite blues cover standards (except for their rendition of the Prince song "Raspberry Beret").

While none of his albums sold more than 100,000 copies, he had a small and faithful following of fans and listeners. Zevon was never bitter during his life about the lack of significant exposure. As he said in an interview in 2000, "I don't feel I was ever badly served by the big old record industry. My records never sold and I never blamed anybody. At least they let me make them. I figured that was the whole deal."



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